

8/1/80

# Natural History Notes



MIKE DOMBECK grew up in the Moose Lake area and graduated from Hayward High School and the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point. He has a B.S. degree in Biology and an M.S. degree in Aquatic Biology. He has taught Zoology at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point and is now a fisheries biologist with the U.S. Forest Service, living in Munising, Michigan. Mike has also been an area fishing guide since his high school days.



## THE OSPREY

Also known as the fish hawk, the osprey is one of our majestic raptors or birds of prey. The scientific name of most plants and animals usually confuses people when, actually, it is often more descriptive than the common name. *Pandion haliaetus* is the scientific name of the osprey. *Pandion* was a king of Athens and *haliaetus* comes from Greek, meaning a sea eagle. So this scientific name is a description of the animal to which it has been given. Another advantage of knowing the scientific names of animals and plants is that they are universal, used worldwide in the scientific community to avoid confusion. Common or local names often change from one area to another and in reality may be more confusing than the more technical term.

Like other birds of prey, the osprey is an extremely strong and skilled flier able to make split second dives and swoops. On its feet are talons or strong sharp claws that can grasp and hold on to prey very tightly. Its beak is sharp and hooked and is used for ripping and tearing meat. Osprey are skilled fishermen and eat only freshly caught fish. This is unlike the eagle which will feast on dead or decaying fish or other meat. An osprey will circle a body of water or perch upon a dead limb over the water until it sees a fish. Then it quickly swoops and sometimes dives into the water with a splash. If successful, this bird will fly to its nest or a perch to eat its catch. If unsuccessful, it will try again and again until its hunger is satiated. Sometimes an

eagle will chase an osprey that has just caught a fish and force it to fly higher and higher until the osprey finally must drop the fish. Then the eagle will catch the fish and eat it. Ospreys were thought to be a good sign to fishermen who would follow these birds to productive fishing grounds.

An adult osprey is about 24 inches long and has a wingspread of up to six feet. As is the case with many species of birds, the female is larger than the male. The female may weigh almost five pounds while the male usually weighs slightly over three pounds.

Preferred habitat for the osprey is lowland adjacent to rivers or lakes. Ideally there would be dead trees or snags which can be used for nest trees or perches with an unobstructed view for fishing. They need productive waters containing good populations of fish to feed on. Osprey prefer to nest near and even above water but they have been known to nest up to three miles away from water in a few instances.

Osprey return to the same nest year after year. In dead trees or snags they construct a nest about three feet in diameter and about 18 inches deep. The nest is made of large sticks and brush and lined with soft grasses or moss and feathers. From two to four chocolate brown eggs are laid and will hatch in 28 days. The eggs are incubated chiefly by the female but the male does help defend the nest and care for the young after they hatch.

At one time the osprey inhabited almost all of North America. It nests in both the north and south but the northern birds must move south to open water as our lakes freeze over. The numbers of osprey have greatly decreased in the past few decades to the point where this bird is very rare or even threatened in many areas. Excessive development of our lakes and stream shores as well as contamination from DDT and PCB are the chief reasons for its decline. Hopefully, with our help in preserving wetlands and regulations banning certain pesticides, the osprey's future will be brightened.

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